

In and out of disaster: tragedy, politics and reception

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You are *ektos...sumphorās*, “outside the disaster”, says a dejected Heracles when Theseus attempts to encourage him to move away from suicidal thoughts and towards accepting his new reality (E. HF 1249). This phrase has always struck me as enormously important both for interpreting the effect of tragedy in its original context and for giving modern readers and spectators a way into interpreting tragedy. Heracles and Theseus represent the relationship between the tragic protagonist and the audience; the one deeply embroiled in unimaginable suffering, the other interested in, and concerned about, that suffering, but fundamentally unable to avert or diminish it. This relationship has both an emotional and a political dimension. Emotionally, Theseus cannot feel exactly the same way that Heracles does, since this would induce similar suicidal paralysis and misery that Heracles feels at this time: he can only keep on encouraging Heracles until he is able to move on. On analogy, in order to appreciate the tragic aspect of Heracles’ tragic suffering, the audience must balance involvement and detachment: to be too close to Heracles’ suffering is to be unable to appreciate it aesthetically and intellectually, while obviously, too great a detachment means that the tragedy has failed at some level with its audience. The genre of tragedy involves multiple detachment devices - mythical settings, language, formalism of various kinds and so on - even as it stirs intense emotions in its audience, suggesting that tragedians were aware of the necessity of enabling or allowing their audiences to be a little “outside the suffering”: Phrynichus discovered at the cost of 1000 drachmas what could happen when the balance between detachment and emotion went wrong (Hdt.6.21.2).

But what does this have to do with politics, specifically, the relationship between specific political interpretation and a universal human meaning in Euripides? The answer also lies in the detachment inherent in Greek tragedy. Critics have found Euripides’ political stance notoriously difficult to pin down, and he is often conceived as a poet who delighted in questioning social, political and religious norms, and disturbing his audience by so doing, but I will argue that a hallmark of his plays is actually the latitude they also give his audience to detach themselves from questioning and disturbance so as to find paradoxical reassurance, even amid the suffering that tragedy presents to them. Thus, although plays such as *Suppliants* and *Heraclidae* among others have been read as ironic and disturbing in their portrayal of Athens’ actions in the world, in fact, another current runs through them that enables their Athenian audience, if they need, to avoid disturbance and irony in how they interpret what happens. That current in its turn is part of what enables modern audiences also to appreciate Euripides and read him politically in their own way. Modern spectators are doubly distanced, since Euripides does not come from our culture or our language, and the conventions of tragedy can seem alien to us, even if a translation is highly colloquial, but that distance also brings a freedom with it, because it enables directors to infuse Euripides’ words with considerations that have their own political meaning for contemporary audiences. In such readings, emotion and political meaning can be renewed effectively because they work through the different levels of detachment within the text: we can project our own meanings onto a text and identify with what moves us, so that a 2500 year old text can speak directly to us, yet

we also always have a kind of escape route if it becomes too intense, remembering, after all, that this is a 2500 year old tragedy: that detachment enables us to bear the unbearable.